

# CENTERVIEW

*Insight and analysis on  
California education policy*

AUGUST 2005

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## **Special Education: Every Teacher's Responsibility**

### ***All California Teachers Need Professional Development and On-the-Job Support to Teach Special Education Students***

In a previous edition of *CenterView* (August 2004) we described how California's growing population of special education students is held to the same high standards of achievement as their general education peers even though there is a significant shortage of credentialed special education teachers. The problem is particularly troublesome in schools serving high proportions of poor and minority students.

Here, we continue that discussion of special education by examining the professional development and support that teachers receive to help them effectively work with students with special needs. With the reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), the federal government has reiterated its emphasis on improving the academic achievement of special education students by standardizing the means by which special education teachers can become designated as "highly qualified," and by mandating professional development for both general and special education teachers.

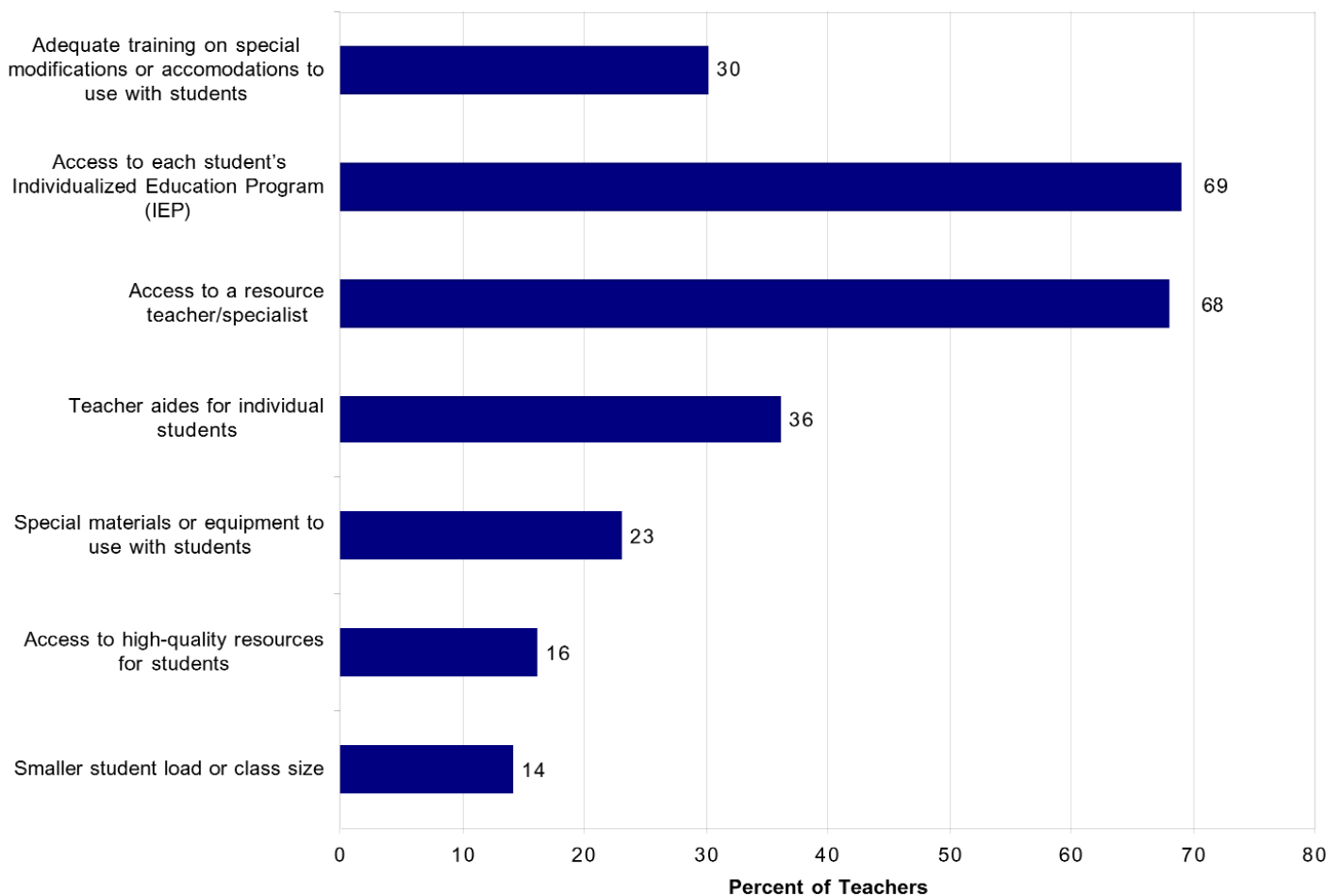
It is clear that changes in professional development aimed at improving special education instruction are needed. A recent survey commissioned by the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and conducted by SRI International found that while the vast majority of California teachers have special education students in their classrooms, many teachers report they do not have the training and support they need to meet the needs of these students.<sup>1</sup> This disparity is troubling given that on average, special education students in California spend almost three-quarters (73%) of their instructional time in a general education classroom.<sup>2</sup> Under state and federal law, these students are expected to participate in the state's assessment system and, as a group, show adequate progress towards meeting the state's academic standards. Virtually all teachers need the skill and knowledge to work with students with special needs. Unfortunately, many general education teachers report that they are not well pre-

pared to work effectively with special education students in the classroom, especially those trained before current preparation standards were adopted in 2001 when special education training for general educators was strengthened. Making matters worse, most teachers do not receive much on-the-job support or professional development in special education.

## The Challenge of Reaching the Teachers of Special Needs Students

In the survey of California teachers described above, 88% of all respondents reported having special education students in their classes. Of those teachers, only 30% indicated “having adequate training on special modifications or accommodations to use with [special education] students.” Teachers reported a lack of other supports as well (see figure). Only 69% reported having access to students’ Individualized Education Plans (students’ instructional plans, designed in concert with parents, teachers, and special education staff, which should be accessible to all teachers who have special education students in their classrooms), and only 68% reported having access to a resource teacher. Far fewer (23%) had special materials or equipment (such as books on tape and computer software) to use with special education students, and only 16% had access to high-quality resources (e.g. appropriate textbooks) for special education students.

### Supports for Teaching Special Education Students



Source: SRI Survey of California Teachers (2003); SRI analysis.

Special education teachers face additional challenges. In case studies conducted for the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, special education teachers reported that they often felt isolated from their general education peers and excluded from school-wide reform efforts. Some reported overwhelming instructional challenges, such as how to incorporate grade-level standards into instruction for students at vastly different levels. In many schools, special education teachers lacked adequate access to and support from speech therapists, school psychologists, school nurses, and classroom aides, making it difficult or impossible to fully address the diverse needs of their students.

### **Few Funding Sources, Limited Reach**

It is clear that both general and special education teachers need high-quality on-the-job support and training to help them better meet the needs of their special education students. However, in California, funding specifically dedicated to support and training for teaching special needs students is very limited.

There are some federal funds which can be used for professional development in special education for special education teachers as well as general education teachers. For example, Title II funds can be used to train teachers of special needs students. There are also formula-based funds allocated to states as part of IDEA that can be spent on professional development; however these funds have limited reach at only \$3.3 million for the entire state. About \$2.5 million of these funds are distributed to the Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA)—consortia of districts and county offices of education that coordinate special education programs and services—and the remainder is spent by the state on training and technical assistance activities. California has also received a competitive State Improvement Grant (SIG) which funds technical assistance and various training activities in seven core areas for special education teachers, but again, it is a modest effort funded at only \$2.1 million per year for three years. Though perhaps high-quality and successful in their own right, these efforts as a whole do not appear sufficient enough to substantially impact the California teacher workforce. Two-thirds of all teachers surveyed reported that their professional development contributed only a little or not at all to their ability to adapt instruction for special education students.

## The Center View

By failing to support and sustain a cohesive teacher development system that targets the needs of all teachers, including those serving special education students, California is falling short of ensuring that these students have adequate and equitable opportunities for educational success. Further, the state is at risk of failing to meet the intent of the No Child Left Behind Act, which specifically states that professional development should provide teachers with instruction in methods of teaching children with special needs.

In recent years, California has begun to move in the right direction by including special education teachers in a few major reform efforts, such as the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment system (BTSA) and Reading First. But there is more to be done—much more. For example, the state should immediately:

- Revise the “Standards for the Teaching Profession” to better align with what teachers should know and be able to do to work successfully with special education students. Training models and manuals incorporating these standards should be developed using the familiar and successful format the California Department of Education and the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing designed for working with beginning teachers.
- Establish mentor teacher resource lists at each SELPA in order to match underprepared teachers with support providers experienced in the field of special education. First priority should be given to matching underprepared teachers with mentors drawn from special education within each district or, if no mentors were available within the district, the county or SELPA region.
- Include the percentage of underprepared, intern, and novice special education teachers in reports on the make-up of the teacher workforce. Make these data publicly available via the School Accountability Report Card (SARC), and staffing reports on the CDE Web site (e.g. DataQuest; Ed-Data).

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that professional development give teachers “the knowledge and skills to provide students with the opportunity to meet challenging State academic content standards and student academic achievement standards.” The Act states further that professional development activities “should be of high quality, sustained, intensive and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher’s performance in the classroom.” Certainly with regard to professional development in the area of special education, the voices of California’s teachers align with these NCLB requirements.

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1. For the purpose of this survey, “support” was defined as access to resources for special education students, including special materials or equipment; access to personnel, such as resource specialists and teachers’ aides; access to professional development targeted on instruction for special education students, and access to a student’s Individualized Education Plan.
  2. California Department of Education (CDE), Special Education Division. (2001). *Special education programs in California: A statistical profile: Part II program characteristics*. Sacramento, CA: CDE. Retrieved from the World Wide Web at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ds/statprof.asp>